

They Don't Stop Knocking

I used to like my apartment. Bright spaces and big windows and everything painted in light colors. The only issue – and likely the reason for the low price – was the lack of an elevator. After a recent experience with another elevator I'm genuinely happy that there is no elevator in my house, but still, it means I need to walk the stairs every day.

And walking the stairs means I need to pass my neighbors apartments. There are no apartments on the ground floor, only a small convenience store that we can't access from the inside. But then, on the first floor (European floor-counting), second floor and third floor are two apartments each. I live on the third floor, with only a storage room above my head.

The knocks started two days ago, at night. I laughed when I realized that they came from the bedroom below mine. I thought it was just noisy sex.

But, when I think about it now, our apartments are all laid out exactly the same. And the sounds didn't come from the direction of the Schoos's bed, it seemed to be more from the direction of their wardrobe.

Still, I didn't think about that two days ago. But yesterday, when I came home from work, the knocking was not just louder; it also didn't stop at all. It wasn't anymore just a few minutes during the night. It was the whole evening. And no matter how many hours of running Mr. and Mrs. Schoos do per day – or which potent chemicals they might have brought from their recent trip to South America – I just don't think anybody can last that long.

Still, I thought it could have been just a malfunctioning generator or dryer or whatnot; I thought it was none of my business.

I was wrong.

I didn't want to say anything, but when I met John, one of the first

floor neighbors (again, European counting) standing in front of the Schoos's apartment door at 10pm I knew that I wasn't the only one. I waited with him while he rang the doorbell that seemed barely audible over the loud knocking sounds from the inside. By that time the knocks sounded like they were near the door, maybe even on the heavy door itself.

Either way, there was no response; the knocking stopped for a moment when John rang the bell – but then it returned, as loud and regular as before – the sound of something soft knocking on something hard, like a stick on sand or a hand on a table.

John thought they were toying with him; he was outraged. He said he would come back later and if they didn't let him in he would call the landlord.

It's good that the knocks moved to the area near the door, rather than stayed in the bedroom. It took me a while, but at least I managed to sleep. But this morning, when I woke up, they were still there, still hammering like sticks against the door.

I thought to myself that John probably just gave up when they didn't answer the door. Our landlord is strict and no one wants to be the guy that gets the other neighbors kicked out. Surely there was a good explanation.

I plugged music in my ears and ran downstairs, past the knocks that seemed to have increased in frequency.

I met Diana, the other tenant from the first floor, on the way out. She stumbled down the stairs with her head and shoulders hanging low. I exchanged pleasantries while I walked next to her and then held the door open for her. She responded with a grumble.

"You okay?" I asked.

"No." She said. "Don't tell me you can sleep with that noise."

“Pretty crazy.” I said. “Maybe they are building a car in there.”

Diana didn’t laugh.

“John said he wanted to tell them off.” I said.

“He told me the same.” Diana said. “But he didn’t tell me how it went.”

“I think they didn’t open.” I said.

She turned left towards the bus station; I turned right, towards my car.

This evening, when I came back to the apartment, I heard it the moment I pulled the front door open. More knocking, louder than before. An orchestra of knocks; and the frequency must at least have doubled.

John and Diana’s floor was quiet. I rang both their doorbells to see if they would come along to tell the Schoos’ off. Neither of them answered the door.

While I passed the Schoos’s apartment the noise level grew. And for the first time I noticed two things:

Firstly, the door was definitely shaking.

Secondly, the noises had changed. There was still the same, dull knocking sound, but additionally to that there was now also a more clonking sound, like chopsticks being hammered on wood. And the frequency had at least doubled.

The neighbors living opposite the Schoos’ had told me that they would be on holidays so I wasn’t surprised that they didn’t answer their door. But I rang the doorbell for the last apartment I hadn’t tried – the one opposite mine; the one of Ethan, the bodybuilding-crazy, 14-eggs-a-day-for-the-protein guy.

He was usually not bothered by noise – when the landlord renovated the storage room upstairs Ethan didn't even notice. And when I threw parties loud enough that the Schoos' called the police, the only complaint Ethan had was that he wasn't invited.

Still, that knocking was just impossible not to hear.

I rang Ethan's doorbell but, like with all the others, there was no reply. When I called his phone Ethan picked up straight away.

"What's up?" He said. "I'm home, you can just come over."

He told me the secret for his serenity: a triple dose of wax earplugs pushed deep into his ear canal.

Still, Ethan agreed to come down with me to quiet the Schoos'. I'm not sure why I didn't dare to go alone; there was just something about the knocks, there was a fervor, an intensity that I just couldn't quite place.

We stood outside their apartment for at least five minutes, my hand on the doorbell, his hand answering the knocks from the inside with knocks from our side. No response.

I only left for a moment; it cannot have been more than a minute. My phone rang, I went back upstairs and into my apartment to pick it up and ask my mother to call me back. Then I heard a short scream. But by the time I came back down Ethan was gone.

Ethan is not answering his door or his phone. And neither are Diana and John.

And now the knocking has increased again. There is a new, even louder thud additionally to the ones I heard before. A thud not unlike Ethan's knocking from the outside.

And, while standing half-way down the stairs, I heard John's mobile ring.

It rang from inside the Schoos' apartment. It rang from right behind the door.